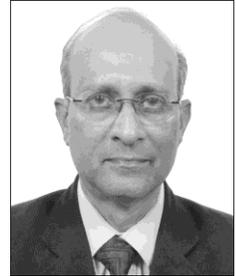


Calvin and the Human Response to Suffering in the Psalms

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The question of suffering has perplexed man throughout the ages. Any consideration of this issue has to grapple with the paradox of the goodness of God, His omnipotence, and the presence of evil. Suffering was an inescapable reality in sixteenth century Europe. Rampant religious persecution,¹ epidemics, inter-state rivalries, and other factors made the issue of suffering strikingly contemporary. Against such a background, it is no surprise that John Calvin's interpretation of affliction has a penetrating quality of relevance. The association of Calvinism, almost exclusively, with certain doctrines such as the sovereignty of God has led to other emphases of Calvin being largely overlooked. The issue of human suffering is one such subject. Calvin's writings contain a significant amount of material on suffering and affliction that is well worth considering.

In his expositions, Calvin struggles to articulate biblical revelation inductively. Where the Bible is silent, he too remains quiet. No easy answers are offered to solve the human predicament; the greater weight of evidence vindicates God's wisdom in allowing human suffering. This is obvious in his

¹ Robert Kingdon gives a graphic description of the gruesome execution of Augustin Marlorat, one of the several missionaries sent from Geneva to France. Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion in France 1555 – 1563* (Geneve: Librairie E.Droz, 1956), 127. Kingdon also refers to the extreme secrecy in which Protestants met for worship and theological discussion in France. Many who were caught during these clandestine meetings were punished, and in the case of preachers, suffered death (1-4). Referring to the label Nicodemite, which was used for those who publicly adhered to Protestantism in France, Kingdon says it was "certainly understandable in times of *savage persecution*." Robert M. Kingdon, *Church and Society in Reformation Europe* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985), 110. Emphasis mine.

sermons on Job.² His commentary on the Psalms, however, contains a wealth of material which primarily focuses on the human response. Here a variety of experiences leads the sufferer to heights of devotion and trust in God. Calvin's interpretation of the Psalms is especially illuminating because of his belief in the sovereignty of God. How does the Reformer interpret the Psalms? Calvin's approach employs a grammatico-historical hermeneutic that gives his work a solid biblical foundation.³ Calvin's own experiences gave his exposition a unique character.⁴ In his expositions we sense the Reformer grappling with the doctrine of God's sovereignty and the human response of seeking answers to the question of suffering. The purpose of this paper is to show that, for Calvin, the Psalms do not teach a fatalistic attitude to suffering. Human response is natural and expected. But the crux of the issue is: What kind of reaction is appropriate – a man-centred reaction or a God-focused one?

This paper will be limited to Calvin's exposition of the Psalms.⁵ The paper will focus primarily on four issues related to suffering in the Psalms: the necessity and purpose of suffering, God's sovereignty, man's predicament and the human response to suffering.

² Though many questions on evil and affliction remain unanswered in Job, the sovereignty of God in human suffering emerges unmistakably.

³ This does not mean that he churned out dry theological treatises on the Psalms. His translator comments that "his first and leading object" was to "ascertain the mind of the Holy Spirit." See John Calvin, *Commentary on The Book of Psalms*, vol. I. Trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1945), vii-xii.

⁴ Based on Calvin's letter to the Physicians of Montpellier and other sources, Dr. Charles L. Cooke diagnoses Calvin's illness as chronic tophaceous gout. Gout, in Calvin's day, included forms of arthritis. Cooke further diagnoses the related problems of kidney stones, which caused severe pain and discomfort. Calvin also suffered from chronic pulmonary tuberculosis, which caused him to cough up blood and was preceded by fever and "prolonged pleurisy or pain with breathing." Although confined to his bed for about eight months on account of hemoptysis or coughing up blood, he dictated his final edition of the *Institutes* into Latin and then translated it into French. During this time he also revised his commentary on Isaiah and printed his lessons on the minor prophets. From Theodore Beza's *Life of Calvin*, Cooke concludes that Calvin also suffered from intestinal parasites, painful bleeding, hemorrhoids, spastic bowel syndrome (irritable colon), and for at least ten years ate only one meal a day. Cooke makes reference to Calvin's migraine headaches. From Beza's account of Calvin's death, he is of the opinion that the Reformer probably died of "septicemia" or shock caused by bacteria growing in his bloodstream." Another possibility, Cooke says, is that Calvin's gout and kidney stones may have caused renal failure or uremia. See Charles L. Cooke, "Calvin's Illnesses and Their Relation to Christian Vocation," in *John Calvin and the Church*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 62-66. Also see, Calvin, *Psalms*, I:xv.

⁵ The writer has dealt with Calvin on suffering in a general sense elsewhere; see Matthew Ebenezer, "Calvin on Christian Suffering: Temporary Punishment or Eternal Blessing?", *Doon Theological Journal* 3, no. 2 (July 2006): 143-161.

I

The Necessity and Purpose of Suffering

Calvin does not view suffering as an unwelcome appendage of Christian life. On the contrary he views it as a necessity. Commenting on Psalm 34:19, he says, "It is, therefore, necessary that they [believers] should be exercised with various trials, and especially for this end, that they may acknowledge that they have been wonderfully preserved by God amidst numberless deaths."⁶ Here the necessity and reason for adversity is given. It almost seems that Calvin wants to vindicate God's goodness by placing deliverance as a corollary of suffering. Similarly, he remarks on Psalm 37:19 (In times of disaster they will not wither; in days of famine they will enjoy plenty.): ". . . the faithful have no right to expect such exemption as the flesh would desire from affliction and trial, but they are assured of deliverance in the end; which, though it be indeed obtained, yet it is of such a nature as can be realized only by faith."⁷ In this case ultimate, not immediate, deliverance is to be expected through faith in God. The spiritual or faith aspect is also seen in Psalm 91:15 (He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him.) Calvin says,

The context, too, may teach us, that faith is not idle or inoperative and that one test, by which we ought to try those who look for Divine deliverance, is, whether they have recourse to God in a right manner. We are taught the additional lesson that believers will never be exempt from troubles and embarrassments. God does not promise them a life of ease and luxury, but deliverance from their tribulations.⁸

A similar idea is found in Calvin's exposition of Psalm 138:7 (Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes, with your right hand you save me.). He writes, "The passage is well deserving our attention, for by nature we are so delicately averse to suffering as to wish that we might all live safely beyond shot of its arrows, and shrink from close contact with the fear of death, as something altogether intolerable."⁹ From the above comments we gather that, for Calvin, deliverance from adversity is one way that God shows His love to

⁶ Calvin, *Psalms*, I:572.

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on The Book of Psalms*, vol. 2., trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1946), 34.

⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol 3., trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1947), 490-491.

⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol.5., trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1949), 203-204.

believers. Therefore suffering becomes a necessity for those who would taste the love of God.

Closely connected with the necessity of suffering is its purpose. The idea of deliverance, which may qualify as a purpose, has already been noted. However, there are others. One purpose is to show that God is close to the sufferer, and he/she to God. Writing on Psalm 3:1 (O LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!), Calvin refers to the pride of David's enemies who assumed that he had been deserted and rejected by God. Even though David is suffering at this time, the difference between him and Absalom is that his hope is in God, while Absalom's is in himself.¹⁰ For Calvin, the purpose of suffering for believers is that they should be drawn closer to God and experience His grace.¹¹ In both the necessity and purpose of affliction, Calvin emphasizes the spiritual aspect of the encounter. Referring to Psalm 31:5, Calvin calls for believers to commit their lives completely into God's hands, totally relying on His providence. The purpose of such action is two-fold: ". . . first that he may protect them by his power, so long as they are exposed to the dangers of this world; and, secondly, that he may preserve them from the grave, where nothing is to be seen but destruction."¹² What does he mean by protection here? Elsewhere he defends God's delays. How can the idea of "protection" be reconciled with prolonged suffering? Calvin would fall back on the sovereignty of God and His wisdom to answer this.

The spiritual aspect also includes perceiving God's will. In Psalm 9:10, according to Calvin, David restricts to believers the ability to comprehend God's ways with man in affliction. This is because their "knowledge of God" helps them discern God's ways.¹³ Spiritual discernment is seen in Psalm 13:1. To David, it seemed that he was forsaken of God. But Calvin says, "At the same time, however, *the eyes of his mind, guided by the light of faith*, penetrated even to the grace of God, although it was hidden in darkness."¹⁴ The above references indicate that the spiritual element of deliverance takes precedence over the physical. The supernatural seems to override the material realm of man's negative experience. Suffering, for Calvin, brings out the positive elements in the life of a believer. The believer begins to show appreciation for God's goodness. On Psalm 66:11 (You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs.), Calvin observes, "They express themselves thankful to God, that, while proved with affliction, they had not been destroyed by it."¹⁵ The experience of suffering, in the life of a believer, is aimed at revealing our commitment. In Psalm 66:14 (vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke when I was in trouble.), he comments, "The best evidence of true piety is when we sigh to God under the pressure of our afflic-

¹⁰ Calvin, *Psalms*, I:29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 572.

¹² *Ibid.*, 501.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13, 182. Emphasis added.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 472.

tions, and show, by our prayers, a holy perseverance in faith and patience; while afterwards we come forward with the expression of our gratitude.”¹⁶ Trials also bring out the development of Christian character. Referring to Psalm 118:18, he writes,

The main thing in adversity is to know that we are laid low by the hand of God, and that this is the way which he takes to prove our allegiance, to arouse us from our torpidity, to crucify our old man, to purge us from our filthiness, to bring us into submission and subjection to God, and to excite us to meditate on the heavenly life.¹⁷

Calvin believes that adversity, though often viewed negatively, has remedial qualities. He says (commenting on Psalm 118:18), “. . . his [God’s] chastisements, so far from being deadly, serve the purpose of a medicine, which, though it produce a temporary debility, rids us of our malady, and renders us healthy and vigorous . . .”¹⁸ He goes on to defend the goodness of adversity. Referring to Psalm 138:7, Calvin says that in the face of danger we act as though divine help is unavailable. He then comments, “This is faith’s true office, to see life in the midst of death, and to trust the mercy of God . . . for God humbles his children under various trials, that his defense of them may be the more remarkable.”¹⁹ The idea implicit here appears to be: The greater the trial, the greater the deliverance. Calvin views suffering as necessary for the Christian life. Its spiritual benefits far outweigh the negative, temporary experiences. It is certain that suffering will be followed by deliverance. For the believer, deliverance not only vindicates God, it also proves His love. Suffering serves to enhance the believer’s spiritual life, draw the person closer to God, give proof of God’s deliverance, and is remedial in nature. The soul waits patiently for deliverance in the face of adversity.

II

God’s Sovereignty

The glory of God is the foundation of Calvin’s theology. Closely related to this is God’s sovereignty. Even in the issue of a believer’s suffering, the certainty of God’s hand in the experience gives the victim hope. In the context of self-denial, Calvin observes that since believers know that their adversity is ordained of God they will bear it “. . . with a peaceful and grateful mind so as not obstinately to resist the command of him into whose power he

¹⁶ Calvin, *Psalms*, II:474-475.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 4., trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1947), 386.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Psalms*, IV:386.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Psalms*, V:204.

once for all surrendered himself and his every possession.”²⁰ In another context he says that certainty about God’s providence will help us in all adversities. He calls for looking beyond the immediate circumstances – which might provoke to anger and impatience – and for meditating upon God’s providence, recalling always the centrality of the will of God. It is necessary for believers to bear the adversity knowing that what God wills is the best for the believer.²¹

In the Psalms the theme of God’s sovereignty is found consistently. Commenting on Psalm 3 he says,

How bitter David’s sorrow was under the conspiracy of his own household against him, which arose from the treachery of his own son, it is easy for everyone of us to conjecture from the feelings of nature. And when, in addition to this, he knew that this disaster was brought upon him by God for his own fault in having defiled another man’s wife and for shedding innocent blood²²

It is interesting to note that in the above statement, Calvin acknowledges David’s sin, and yet goes beyond this *causa secundae* to God, the *prima causa*. Suffering, even in “deserving” cases is sent by God.

God’s sovereignty is not such that He merely allows suffering to come upon people, but that He is totally in control of it. Commenting on Psalm 9:20 (Strike them with terror, O Lord; let the nations know they are but men.), Calvin says, “We are taught, by this manner of praying, that however insolently and proudly our enemies may boast of what they will do, yet they are in the hand of God, and can do no more than what he permits them . . .”²³ God’s overall control over affliction is presented graphically by Calvin in his comment on Psalm 11:6 (On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulphur; a scorching wind will be their lot), on which he says, “. . . while God defers the infliction of punishment, the knowledge of his justice will have a powerful influence in maintaining our faith, until he actually shows that he has never departed from his watch-tower, from which he beholds the actions of men”.²⁴ In other words, God is pictured as actively involved in the suffering of the believer. Further, even His delays are with purpose and are connected with His sovereignty. God’s patience in dealing with evil is part of his supreme will. This is seen clearly in Psalm 79:5 (How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever? How long will your jealousy burn like fire?), on which Calvin writes:

²⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Library of Christian Classics, Vols. XX-XXI (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), III.vii.10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Lxvii.B. ???

²² Calvin, *Psalms*, I:27. Emphasis added.

²³ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

. . . this complaint was not ended within a month or two after persecution against the Church commenced, but at a time when the hearts of the faithful were almost broken though the weariness produced by prolonged suffering. . . . Being fully persuaded that *the wicked, whatever they may plot, cannot inflict injury, except in so far as God permits them* – from this, which they regard as an indubitable principle, they at once conclude, that when he allows such ample scope to their heathen enemies in persecuting them, his anger is greatly provoked. Nor would they, without this persuasion, have looked to God in the hope that he would stretch forth his hand to save them; for *it is the work of Him who hath given loose reins to draw in the bridle.*²⁵

Trust in the sovereignty of God gives the believer hope in the midst of tribulation.

Calvin seems to imply that afflictions are punishments sent by God and that there is nothing that happens by chance. Referring to Psalm 107:6 (Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.), he sees God's sovereignty in all events, good and evil (see also verses 28, 13, 19). He says, "For surely it is not by mere chance that a person falls into the hands of enemies or robbers; neither is it by chance that he is rescued from them. But this is what we must constantly keep in view, that all afflictions are God's rod, and that therefore there is no remedy for them elsewhere than in his grace."²⁶

In other contexts also he rules out chance. Alluding to Psalm 115:3 (Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.), he says,

However much, then, the faithful may find themselves cut off from all means of subsistence and safety, they ought nevertheless to take courage from the fact, that God is not only superior to all impediments, but that he can render them subservient to the advancement of his own designs. This, too, must also be borne in mind, that all events are the result of God's appointment alone, and that nothing happens by chance.²⁷

Closely connected with the concept of God's sovereignty is the reality of *delays* in receiving deliverance. It appears that His delays have a definite purpose in conditioning the believer. This can be seen from Psalm 9:9 (The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.). In this verse Calvin sees "a remedy for the temptation" of those who are "abandoned to the will of the ungodly, while God keeps silence." David, according

²⁵ Calvin, *Psalms*, III:286. Emphasis added.

²⁶ Calvin, *Psalms*, IV:252. Emphasis added.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 344.

to Calvin, reminds us that God delays help and appears to forsake His people, only to assist them “at a more convenient season, according to the greatness of their necessity and affliction.”²⁸ Another purpose of delays is found in Psalm 18:17 (He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes, who were too strong for me.). Calvin says, “. . . the most seasonable time for God to aid his people is when they are unable to sustain the assaults of their enemies . . . when, broken and afflicted, they sink under their violence . . .”²⁹ Reducing man to a helpless state is found also in Psalm 71:20, says Calvin, “We must be brought down even to the gates of death before God can be seen to be our deliverer.”³⁰ Similarly, the extremity of suffering is seen in Psalm 77:7, where Calvin comments, “He intimates that he was almost overwhelmed by a long succession of calamities; for he did not break forth into this language until he had endured affliction for so long a period as hardly to venture to entertain the hope that God would in future be favourable to him”³¹ Calvin seems to be comfortable with these extreme delays. But are these really necessary? It appears that Calvin is trying to establish God’s sovereignty in all situations in order that all glory will be to Him alone.

Delays are also reflective of God’s own time schedules. In Psalm 9:12 (For he who avenges blood remembers; he does not ignore the cry of the afflicted.), Calvin is consistent in maintaining that God acts in His own time. The apparent absence of His help is because He is waiting for the right time to intervene.³² This same idea is found in Psalm 10:15 (Break the arm of the wicked and evil man; call him to account for his wickedness that would not be found out.). Here too Calvin asserts that God will act only in His time. Commenting on this verse, which has no reference to the actual time when judgment would be carried out, the same theme recurs. He explains this verse thus: “Lord, *as soon as it shall seem good to thee* to break the arm of the wicked, thou wilt destroy him in a moment . . .”³³ God’s delays, however, do not affect our safety. On Psalm 12: 5 he writes, “. . . although safety is in his [God’s] hand, and, therefore, in secure keeping, yet he does not immediately grant deliverance from affliction . . .”³⁴

In Psalm 18:27 Calvin tries to answer the dilemma of why merciful people are often afflicted by saying that David asks the believer to wait till the end. He says,

If he did not keep his people in suspense and waiting long for deliverance from affliction, it could not be said that it is his prerogative to save the afflicted. And it is no small consolation, in the

²⁸ Calvin, *Psalms*, I:118-119.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 277.

³⁰ Calvin, *Psalms*, III:97.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

³² Calvin, *Psalms*, I:123. Emphasis added.

³³ *Ibid.*, 153. Emphasis added.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.

midst of our adversities, to know that God purposely delays to communicate his assistance, which otherwise is quite prepared, that we may experience his goodness in saving us after we have been afflicted and brought low³⁵

The idea of delay reveals God's absolute sovereignty in allowing and causing suffering and also in alleviating it. But why does God employ harsh and painful methods to deal with His own children? Should God delay deliverance to His own children? Calvin almost views delay as a kind of necessity in deliverance! A similar idea is seen in Psalm 22:24 (For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.). Calvin sees here an encouragement for sufferers, that God will demonstrate His mercy to them. He continues to affirm his basic premise that patience must be exercised in affliction, ". . . however long it shall please the Lord to keep them in a state of distress, that he may at length succour them, and lend them his aid when they are so severely tried."³⁶

The sovereignty of God over human suffering is transparent in Calvin's judgment. Secondary causes obviously have their function, but the ultimate "source" for human suffering is the action of God. There is no possibility of chance in suffering. God's sovereignty can be seen in His delays. These delays have specific functions. They are designed to bring deliverance to the believer at the right time. They also work to condition the believer to fully give up trusting in himself. The knowledge of the sovereignty of God, instead of creating frustration and despair, brings hope to the believer.

III

Man's Predicament

Calvin is careful to point out that suffering is not always because of man's sin. David's flight from Absalom, the background of Psalm 3, gives interesting insights into Calvin's thinking. To him, David was punished by God because of the sin of adultery and murder.³⁷ Yet, he also implies that David did not deserve his suffering under Absalom. Commenting on verses 3 and 4, he says that David does not dwell on the punishment as coming from God. He knows it is, but he is confident of God's help. (In fact, David's action can be a model for others.) He then says, "And thus it becomes the servants of God to act when molested by the wicked . . . when *undeservedly subjected to evil treatment*."³⁸ Perhaps a more direct reference to undeserved punishment is in the twenty-third Psalm. Commenting on verse 4 (Even though I walk through

³⁵ Ibid., 288.

³⁶ Ibid., 381.

³⁷ See footnote 3.

³⁸ Calvin, *Psalms*, I:31-32. Emphasis added.

the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.), Calvin writes, “True believers, although they dwell safely under the protection of God, are, notwithstanding, exposed to many dangers, or rather they are liable to all the afflictions which befall mankind in common, that they may the better feel how much they need the protection of God.”³⁹ When experiencing suffering, however, the believer needs to ask whether the adversities pressing upon him are due to his own faults.

The need to ascertain one’s innocence is important to Calvin. Referring to Psalm 7:4 (if I have done evil to him who is at peace with me or without cause have robbed my foe.), where David pleads his innocence he comments, “. . . as often as we have recourse to God, we must make it our first care to be well assured in our cause; for we do him great wrong if we wish to engage him as the advocate and defender of a bad cause . . .”⁴⁰ Similarly, in connection with Psalm 25:18 (Look upon my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins.), he observes a connection between affliction and sins. Sins are not always the cause of affliction. However, he says, “. . . as often as God afflicts us, we are called to examine our own hearts, and humbly seek reconciliation with him.”⁴¹ It appears that the believer needs to be sure that he is not at fault. Calvin’s comments on Psalm 55:3 read, “Our greatest comfort under persecution is conscious rectitude, the reflection that we have not deserved it; for there springs from this the hope that we will experience the help of the Lord, who is the shield and defence of the distressed . . .”⁴² The knowledge of our innocence seems to guarantee deliverance. If this is so, what if the victim of suffering deserves the punishment because of his sins? There does not seem to be an answer for this.

Calvin develops a spiritual perspective on suffering with his frequent reference to the suppression of “sense and reason.” With reference to Psalm 9:12, he says that if we judge God’s help “according to our senses,” then we will soon be discouraged.⁴³ A similar comment is made regarding Psalm 13:3, where he says, “. . . until God actually puts forth his hand to give relief, *carnal reason* suggests to us that he shuts his eyes, and does not be hold us.”⁴⁴ At times Calvin juxtaposes sense and reason as in his remarks on Psalm 17:15, “. . . although, to the eye of sense and reason, God has cast him off, and removed him far from him, yet he assures himself that one day he will enjoy the privilege of familiarly beholding him.”⁴⁵ What does Calvin advocate? Does he mean that sense and reason are unreliable? He appears to say this. In his *Institutes*, Calvin refers to the limitations of human compo-

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 394.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, I:78.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 434.

⁴² Calvin, *Psalms*, II:329.

⁴³ Calvin, *Psalms*, I:123. Emphasis added.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 184. Emphasis added.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 253.

nents. Carnal sense cannot fully comprehend the extent of God's activity in the world.⁴⁶ It also cannot understand how God uses the wicked for good purposes.⁴⁷ Similarly, reason has its own limitations. In his discussion on the limits of human reason he says, in spiritual matters, "the greatest geniuses are blinder than moles!"⁴⁸ Thus, if the believer tries to comprehend God's dealings in human terms, he is bound to be frustrated. These two faculties – sense and reason – appear immensely crucial to Calvin. In his comment on Psalm 22:1, the two words are repeated. He says,

There is not one of the godly who does not daily experience in himself the same thing [feeling forsaken]. According to the judgement of the flesh, he thinks he is cast off and forsaken by God, while yet he apprehends by faith the grace of God which is hidden from the eye of sense and reason *Carnal sense and reason cannot but conceive of God as being either favourable or hostile, according to the present condition of things* which is presented to their view.⁴⁹

A similar reference is made about Psalm 71 :10, where he says, "Measuring the favour of God only by what is the present condition of men, they conceive that all whom he suffers to be afflicted are despised, forsaken, and cast off by him."⁵⁰ It appears that Calvin forgets that the Psalms often speak in the terms of God being favourable or hostile. It is the present condition that makes these conclusions. How can he expect anything different? It appears that, here, he advocates a Stoic attitude towards suffering. Is it correct to respond to adversity impassively? Calvin's insights, in this regard, fail to do justice to the torment of the soul of the sufferer.

For Calvin, in the place of sense and reason, faith takes control. Commenting on Psalm 56:9 (Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help. By this I will know that God is for me.), he writes, "He had no sensible evi-

⁴⁶ Calvin says that carnal sense stops only in contemplating on the wisdom and omnipotence of the Creator God, without going further. It is faith that goes beyond and perceives God as "Governor and Preserver." Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvi.1.

⁴⁷ Carnal sense cannot fathom the reality that God uses Satan and his disciples and still remains pure. Therefore, some persons were trying to introduce the idea of God's permission, and not his will, to account for evil in the world. *Ibid.*, I.xviii.1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, II.ii.18. In the same section Calvin admits that there are glimpses of wisdom to be found in the philosophers. But he explains this thus: "But they saw things in such a way that their seeing did not direct them to the truth, much less enable them to attain it! They are like a traveller passing through a field at night who in a momentary lightning flash sees far and wide, but the sight vanishes so swiftly that he is plunged again into the darkness of the night before he can even take a step – let alone be directed on his way by its help." See also *Institutes*, II.ii.19-21.

⁴⁹ Calvin, *Psalms*, I:358. Emphasis added.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Psalms*, III:88.

dence of their approaching destruction; but from the firm reliance which he exercised upon the promise, he was able to anticipate the coming period, and resolved to wait for it with patience.”⁵¹ Similarly, on Psalm 69:3, he says, “He certainly did not cry out before from mere affectation, nor was his hoarseness contracted in the course of one day. We perceive, then, that although his bodily senses failed him, the vigour of his faith was by no means extinguished.”⁵² Faith rests on the surety of deliverance. This is seen in the following comment on Psalm 85:4, “Although to the eye of sense and reason there may be no apparent ground to hope favourably as to our condition, it becomes us to believe that our salvation rests secure in his hand, and that, whenever he pleases, he can easily and readily find the means of bringing salvation to us.”⁵³ Again, commenting on Psalm 27:5 (For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock.), Calvin says, “. . . we are taught not to measure the aid of God by outward appearances or visible means, but even in the midst of death to hope for deliverance from his powerful and victorious hand.”⁵⁴ Calvin has shown that “faith and hope” are the antidotes for suffering. He has also asserted that “carnal sense and reason” are hopelessly inept to discern God’s ways in suffering. However, cannot faith and hope be mere spiritual “tranquilizers” to drowse the sufferer? Calvin does not think so. He consistently holds on to the belief that suffering cannot be merely viewed from a human perspective. The spiritual, divine dimension of adversity can only be understood by minds that are infused with the presence of God.

IV

Man’s Response to Suffering

Fundamental to Calvin’s position is that suffering should draw the sufferer close to God. Commenting on Psalm 4, he observes that suffering should draw the believer to contemplate on the promises of God which give hope of deliverance.⁵⁵ The focus should not be man, but God. With reference to Psalm 5:2 (Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray.), he writes, “. . . for they who, disregarding God, either fret inwardly or utter their complaints to men, are not worthy of being regarded by him.”⁵⁶ Calvin says that David assumes a general principle in affliction: “. . . That whoever call (*sic*) upon God in their calamities never meet with a repulse from him.”⁵⁷ Again, in Psalm 28:1 (To you I call, O LORD my Rock; do not

⁵¹ Calvin, *Psalms*, II:356.

⁵² Calvin, *Psalms*, III:47-48.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, I:455-456.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 53

turn a deaf ear to me. For if you remain silent, I will be like those who have gone down to the pit,) for Calvin, affliction and suffering should drive us to God alone. He says, "It is not enough for one who is in such a state of affliction to be sensible of his misery, unless, convinced of his inability to help himself, and renouncing all help from the world, he betake himself to God alone."⁵⁸ Calvin continues by saying, "And as the Scriptures inform us that God answers true believers when he [God] shows by his operations that he regards their supplications, so the word silent is set in opposition to the sensible and present experience of his aid, when he appears, as it were, not to hear their prayers."⁵⁹

Calvin, unfortunately, does not enlighten us on how God shows that He hears us. All along Calvin has been saying that God allows the believer to go through times of experiencing silence. What does he mean here by saying that true believers will be answered? Where is the element of indefiniteness which is present in other contexts? Perhaps a different perspective emerges in the next verse – Psalm 28:2 (Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help, as I lift up my hands toward your Most Holy Place.) Calvin sees in the "Most Holy Place" a reminder of the covenant of God. With this understanding, he says, ". . . David clung to the sanctuary with no other view than that by the help of God's promise he might rise above the elements of the world . . ."⁶⁰ What then, are the "operations" of God by which a believer comes to experience deliverance? They seem to indicate a subjective, spiritual, and mystical experience. Calvin is not very clear about this.

Calvin is consistent in vindicating God of any blame, even those involved with man's response to affliction. Commenting on Psalm 34, Calvin addresses the thorny issue of whether David was guided by the Holy Spirit to feign madness before Abimelech. His answer is that David's deliverance came from God, but the "intermediate sin" was David's. He says, "It may then sometimes happen that the event shall be brought to pass by the Spirit of God, and yet the saints whom he may employ as instruments shall swerve from the path of duty."⁶¹ The context plainly implies that David, *in order to escape his predicament, feigned madness*. If this is the case, then may the believer too "work out" his own deliverance? Calvin does not address this issue, but it has relevance to his concept of response to suffering. He has maintained that the believer should wait calmly for God to act. David's action seems to indicate that exceptions are possible.

The sufferer should exercise patience in suffering. On Psalm 37:39 (The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD; he is their stronghold in time of trouble.), he comments, "By this he [David] admonishes the children of God to learn patiently to endure afflictions, and that, if God should pro-

⁵⁸ Ibid., 466.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 466.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 467.

⁶¹ Ibid., 556.

long them, they should often recall this to their remembrance, that after he has tried their patience, he will in the end deliver them.”⁶² This patience, for Calvin, needs to be filled with hope. He notes on Psalm 38:15 “. . . the mind of man will never be framed to gentleness and meekness, nor will he be able to subdue his passions, until he has learned never to give up hope.”⁶³ The believer ought always to depend on God’s word for comfort. He comments, on Psalm 119:50 (My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life.), “. . . if we meditate carefully on his word, we shall live even in the midst of death, nor will we meet with any sorrow so heavy for which it will not furnish us with a remedy,” and continues to say that if we are not comforted, then the blame rests on us because “despising or overlooking the word of God, we purposely deceive ourselves with vain consolation.”⁶⁴ The Word of God gives the sufferer true comfort. This is found again in Psalm 119:92 (If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.) Here he notes, “The prophet declares that he was grievously oppressed by a weight of afflictions enough to overwhelm him; but that the consolation which he derived from the Divine Law, in such desperate circumstances, was as life to him.”⁶⁵ Together with deriving hope and strength from the Word, the sufferer ought to throw himself on God’s mercy. Calvin says, in connection with Psalm 120:1, “It is therefore worthy of notice, that he [David] was heard when, constrained and shut up by tribulation, he betook himself to the protection of God.”⁶⁶ Does this, however, mean that the sufferer is always heard when he reposes absolute confidence in God? How often have sufferers yielded themselves totally to God’s protection and still have not been delivered? Though this may seem like an inconsistency in Calvin, we shall presently see, in connection with “sense and reason,” that he was thoroughly consistent.

Perhaps the most tangible response to affliction is prayer. Commenting on Psalm 102, especially referring to its title: “A prayer of an afflicted man. When he is faint and pours out his lament before the LORD”, Calvin writes, “Although you may be afflicted with anguish and despair, you must not on that account desist from prayer.”⁶⁷ On Psalm 5:4 (You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell.) Calvin asserts that trying situations can be turned to “enforce prayer for divine favour” towards the sufferer. Recognizing the abruptness of David’s language, he concludes that the saints’ “stammering is more acceptable to God than all the figures of rhetoric, be they ever so fine and glittering.”⁶⁸ Again, on Psalm 17:1 (Hear, O LORD, my righteous plea; listen to my cry. Give ear to my prayer – it does

⁶² Calvin, *Psalms*, II:52.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, IV:437.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 471. ??

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.??

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶⁸ Calvin, *Psalms*, I:55.

not rise from deceitful lips.), he says that maintaining one's innocence in the midst of suffering is important. However, this alone is an insufficient response to suffering. The victim has to engage in prayer, for one who does not pray ". . . defrauds God of the honour which belongs to him, in not referring his cause to Him, and in not leaving him to judge and determine in it."⁶⁹ The intensity of prayer should match the severity of the suffering. On Psalm 17:9, Calvin comments, "The greater, therefore, the terror with which we are stricken by the cruelty of our enemies, the more ought we to be quickened to ardour in prayer."⁷⁰ This can be misinterpreted by calling for lesser and greater effort in prayer as the case may require.

For Calvin, prayer should be the natural response to suffering. He comments on Psalm 18:6 (In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears.), "Let us therefore learn, that such an example is set before our eyes, that no calamities, however great and oppressive, may hinder us from praying or create an aversion to it."⁷¹ On Psalm 22:2 (O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent.), Calvin alludes to the "long continuance" of affliction. For Calvin, one outcome of affliction for the believer seems to be developing constancy of faith through persevering prayer.⁷²

What is the function of prayer? Here Calvin's observations are surprising. In Psalm 27:7 (Hear my voice when I call, O LORD; be merciful to me and answer me.), prayer, for Calvin, is an "armor"⁷³ for David "to break through his temptations."⁷⁴ An interesting comment on this follows. He says, "By the word *cry* [or *call*], he expresses his vehemence, as I have elsewhere said, *that he may thereby move God the sooner to help him*."⁷⁵ Again, a similar comment appears in Psalm 31:9 (Be merciful to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and my body with grief.). Calvin says, "*To move God* to succour him, he magnifies the greatness of his misery and grief by the number of his complaints; not that God needs arguments to persuade him, but because he allows the faithful to deal *familiarly* with him . . ."⁷⁶ These comments of the Reformer show his concern for interpreting the Word faithfully. However, does Calvin really mean that our prayers can *move* God? There is a tension here that is not easily resolved. Similarly, referring to Psalm 109:4 (In return for my friendship they accuse me, but I am a man of prayer.), he comments, "And as the Holy Spirit taught David and all

⁶⁹ Ibid., 236.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 245.

⁷¹ Ibid., 266.

⁷² Ibid., 362.

⁷³ The word here probably includes weapons, not merely protective clothing.

⁷⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, I:456.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 456. Emphasis added.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 506. Emphasis added.

the godly to offer up prayers like these, it must follow, that those who, in this respect, imitate them, will be *promptly* helped by God when he beholds them reproachfully and vilely persecuted.”⁷⁷ Here again is apparent ambiguity. Divine assistance did not appear promptly to Job who suffered “unjustly.” In other contexts Calvin asserts the indefiniteness of deliverance. How then can emancipation here be expected promptly? A few verses below, Calvin reiterates his view of “delayed deliverance.” Commenting on Psalm 109:20 (May this be the LORD’s payment to my accusers, to those who speak evil of me.), he says, “Should he [God], for the trial of our faith, deprive us of all earthly assistance, instead of regarding that as any reflection upon the glory of his name, we ought to wait until the proper time arrive when he will fully display that decision in which we can calmly acquiesce.”⁷⁸ Calvin tempers his views on divine deliverance by alluding to God’s will in suffering. Commenting on Psalm 119:107, Calvin calls praying “according to God’s word” the “key” that we need to gain access to the throne of grace.⁷⁹ Again, in Psalm 119:153 (Look upon my suffering and deliver me, for I have not forgotten your law), he says that saints should not be discouraged by adversity “. . . but rather rest satisfied with the consolatory consideration, that the gate of prayer is open to them.”⁸⁰ Prayer, then, is not an “open sesame” to cater to human wishes. Intense prayer is beneficial to expedite answers. However, the true believer always prays “according to God’s will.” The tensions alluded to in prayer in adversity show the Reformer’s sincerity in grappling with the issue of suffering.

A proper response to suffering involves a trust in the character of God. In connection with Psalm 10:1 (Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?), Calvin sees a rule which gives hope in the midst of suffering: “We should seek comfort and solace in the providence of God; for amidst our agitations, vexations, and cares, we ought to be fully persuaded that it is his peculiar office to give relief to the wretched and afflicted.”⁸¹ Again on Psalm 12: 1, he says, “. . . from his [David’s] example we may learn to betake ourselves to God when we see nothing around us but black despair.”⁸² The sufferer, in the midst of adversity, is drawn to God himself. This being “drawn” is not mere abandoning oneself into God’s hands, but an active exercise of faith. This can be seen in Psalm 54:5 (Let evil recoil on those who slander me; in your faithfulness destroy them.), where Calvin observes, “. . . for nothing can support us in the hour of temptation, when the Divine deliverance may be long delayed, but a firm persuasion that God is true, and that he cannot deceive us by his divine promises.”⁸³

⁷⁷ Calvin, *Psalms*, IV:273. Emphasis added.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 481-482.

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Psalms*, V:30.

⁸¹ Calvin, *Psalms*, I:134.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 171.

⁸³ Calvin, *Psalms*, II:325-326.

The response of the believer to suffering has many interesting facets. The basic premise is that the natural response is being drawn to God. In cases where the sufferer tries to extricate himself from his adversity, then he is guilty of any sins committed in the process, but God is not at fault. The sufferer is also called upon to exercise patience in suffering. Prayer, for Calvin, is a natural response to suffering. Here he talks about “moving” God through intense prayer. Is he right to speak thus? Perhaps the most important aspect of man’s response is that he learns to trust in the character of God.

Conclusion

Suffering, for Calvin, is not an aberration in God’s world. He views it as an essential element of the Christian life. Several unique concepts emerge from Calvin’s interpretation of suffering in the Psalms.

- 1) Deliverance becomes the focus of the human experience of suffering. From this standpoint, suffering assumes a positive function. The prospect of deliverance significantly alters the harsh reality of suffering. This blends with Calvin’s overall view of the goodness of God.
- 2) Suffering has a remedial quality. It heals and purifies the believer. Viewed from the perspective of human depravity and the presence of sin, it is necessary.
- 3) The cognizance of one’s innocence in suffering is a source of encouragement. This gives more assurance of eventual divine deliverance.
- 4) Calvin consistently teaches the absolute sovereignty of God in human suffering. He stands on solid biblical ground. It is from this perspective that there can be any answer to the question of human suffering.
- 5) Apparent delays are only part of God’s schedule. Man must be patient. Patience is necessary to conform to God’s will.
- 6) “Carnal sense and reason” cannot perceive divine intentions in the experience of suffering. They are limited. Sense and reason tend to judge adversity externally, physically, and temporarily. For Calvin, these categories are insufficient to comprehend God’s dealings with man. The divine foci are internal, spiritual, and eternal. Faith and hope, rather than sense and reason, give the sufferer the transcendent perspective.
- 7) Prayer is the tangible human response to suffering. Prayer, however, does not guarantee immediate deliverance. Calvin wrestles with the function of prayer. He tries to reconcile earnest prayer and God’s response. Here, he comes dangerously close to denying the sovereignty of God. He talks of prayer being able to move God. He even refers to David magnifying his trials in order to get God’s response. Although Calvin does temper his statements by saying that God does not need such goads to respond, he still appears trapped in a dilemma. Positively, this tension reveals the sincerity with which the Reformer approached the text.
- 8) The proper response to suffering develops a healthy recognition and

trust in the character of God, especially His sovereignty. For Calvin, the question of suffering cannot be considered in isolation. To him, every facet of Christian life, including suffering, is like a spoke of a wheel. The hub is God's sovereignty.

In conclusion, we note that Calvin lived in a period overwhelmed by religious persecution and fatal epidemics. He developed his concept of suffering from a biblical, God-centred, spiritual perspective. He views suffering as an integral component of God's will for man. God is sovereign in allowing and willing suffering. Evil agents are used to accomplish His will, and yet He remains pure. The sufferer's predicament is that he cannot comprehend the divine scheme with his limited sense and reason. There are several possible responses to suffering. The fundamental criterion for every response is whether or not the response to the experience of adversity is helping the person come closer to God. In the final analysis, suffering becomes a positive, rather than a negative, phenomenon. Calvin develops a supra-temporal perspective on suffering in which the long-term and eternal benefits outweigh the immediate discomforts.

There are several positive elements in Calvin's understanding of suffering in the Psalms. The basic strength of Calvin's exposition is his consistent emphasis on the sovereignty of God. God's sovereignty is central to the question of suffering. Another is that the sufferer is drawn closer to God. He begins to learn about God and His character. Without the fundamental focus on God, suffering will not make sense to the believer. Calvin's insistence that "sense and reason" cannot function as aids to solve the dilemma of adversity is commendable. This position eliminates the need to answer the secular questions raised by common sense and reason. Having extricated human suffering from the temporal world, he confidently points to God's sovereignty as the answer to human misery.

The deficiency of Calvin's views is in the practical sphere. When he tries to provide a rationale for persistent prayer in the midst of suffering, his impregnable fortress of God's sovereignty almost collapses. The Reformer tries hard to reconcile the prayers of the Psalmist and the silence of God. His sincerity makes him allude to man influencing God. However, he quickly recovers to stand once more on the platform of God's sovereignty and view suffering from this all encompassing perspective. Calvin's exposition of the Psalms reveals a remarkable level of honesty in dealing sincerely with the biblical text.